


Triologue in raising good news agents: A case study from InnerCHANGE South Africa

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This article is a case study. It reflects on InnerCHANGE South Africa's (ICSA) efforts to develop missionaries emerging from African neighbourhoods of poverty. ICSA calls those missionaries, good news agents. This reflection considers the concept of triologue - a discerning interaction between church, culture and biblical narrative- to reflect on the ICSA leadership development approach. In the world of mission, people may be satisfied with nurturing leaders to know and live by biblical principles for personal wellbeing. ICSA challenges itself to pursue a missional model of leadership development that seeks to make a tangible impact in a local community. This is a work in process that this article seeks to reflect on. This reflection is guided by the following question: what is the triologue that informs the ICSA model of leadership development? This article has discovered that the creation of spaces where people can learn to serve and lead would be a good way to incubate good news agents. It also discovered that tapping into the age group of children, teenagers and youth could raise leadership capacity in local communities of poverty. It also discovered that intentional discipleship that seeks to reverse an ingrained victim mentality found in communities of poverty into an agency to build from the inside out could be an asset to communities of poverty. It finally discovered that building communities of practices to sustain emerging and existing good news agents could sustain the ICSA efforts.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This is a missiological research that interacts with community development literature to reflect on a missional team efforts in the leadership development to the lowest level.

Keywords: community; leadership; regeneration; polycentric; space.

Introduction

I was invited to make a contribution to a Festschrift in honour of professor (Prof. hereafter) Nelus Niemandt. I consider this invitation a privilege. I met Prof. Niemandt in 2006 when the missional community I was a member of, NieuCommunities, invited a leading voice around the world on the missional church, Alan Hirsch, to South Africa to help us be effective in our efforts to live missionally. Professor Niemandt came with some of his fellows from the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) to learn alongside my community members. Few years later, Prof. Niemandt positively influenced my pursuit of postgraduate studies, which I completed in 2019. While during my doctoral studies, I worked under Prof. Niemandt as a part-time lecturer at the University of Pretoria. Professor Niemandt's writings have been critical in my understanding of the missional church and missional leadership, specifically the concept of triologue, as I pursued incarnational ministry in communities of poverty.

As an incarnational ministry, InnerCHANGE South Africa's (ICSA) hope is to develop leaders 'who are marked by merciful action, transformative contemplation and prophetic justice' (innerchange.org 2024). InnerCHANGE South Africa describes these leaders as good news agents who are understood as followers of Jesus:

[W]ho seek the peace and prosperity of their context in tangible ways and invite other people to do the same so that quality of life can be improved, lives can flourish and communities can be built from the inside out. (Kabongo 2020:6)

InnerCHANGE South Africa aspires to equip good news agents with 'a theological and missiological posture' to be solution-seeking in response to the challenges of their local

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communities, city, country or continent (Joubert 2019:3284). The concept of trialogue has been helpful in ICSA's attempt to nurture good news agents. Trialogue is understood as:

[T]he discerning interaction between church, culture, and biblical narrative-to seek, discover, understand, and share in what the Holy Spirit is up to in the close-to-the-ground particulars of engagement in, with, against and for the world. (Niemandt 2010:1)

Good news agents are taught to discern 'with the Holy Spirit and God's community what God is doing in the world' around them (Franklin 2017:150). They are also taught to prioritise biblical principles and learn to be bold in imagining what it means to be tangible signs of hope in their everyday experience. They are also taught to be attentive to 'inner transformation and that of those they lead (Franklin 2017:150). They are finally taught to regularly interact with biblical scriptures and the role of the church in their context in participating in the well-being and good quality of life of ordinary people.

InnerCHANGE South Africa teachings are a work in process. Reflecting on them offers the potential for improvement. In this reflection, the author is guided by the following question: what is the trialogue that informs ICSA model of leadership development? This research uses the case study of ICSA to reflect on how the concept of trialogue has influenced its understanding of space, its efforts to tap into contextually unconventional leadership age groups, its discipleship model and its efforts to build communities of practice.

Creation of space

InnerCHANGE South Africa mission statement is: as part of the body of Christ, InnerCHANGE South Africa aims to develop good news agents. Good news agents are developed taking into consideration the cultural context they serve in. The neighbourhoods of poverty where ICSA serves are still influenced by the legacy of apartheid. These neighbourhoods are predominantly populated by black people who were on the receiving hand of the system of apartheid. This system assumed 'the right of one people to impose their will upon another' (Onyie & Ebolt 2011:42). It led many people who were on the receiving end of it to believe in the superiority and inferiority of culture, and they therefore saw their culture as inferior. This system broke the self-esteem, self-confidence and the sense of identity of those on the receiving end of it (Wafula, Mombo & Wandera 2016:xxiii). One could argue that this system may have a negative impact on people's self-belief in their leadership ability.

The author believes that decolonising minds could be a pathway towards restoring self-belief in people. He understands that a decolonised mind can be described as 'a mind that believes that it has what it takes in be a blessing to others', to make a positive contribution to the building of society, starting from a local community (Kabongo 2018:2).

InnerCHANGE South Africa has found it helpful to create physical spaces where ordinary people living in

neighbourhoods of poverty can join and learn from doing to be servant leaders. Like Jesus invited his first disciples to follow him and observe him before they start leading others (Mk 1:14-16), ICSA believes that a 'leader must first be a follower, walking with Christ, knowing the One he or she follows' (Van Wynen & Niemandt 2020:9). In the Bible, Jesus seemed to have called 'followers to follow him', not leaders (Van Wynen & Niemandt 2020:9). Inspired from this model, ICSA would need to create spaces where followers who are willing to remain lifelong followers of Jesus could be invited into. These spaces could form functional communities of followers who would learn to invite potential followers to join the circle of other followers. Such spaces could become polycentric in which there will be, 'a community of leaders' and 'followers within one space' (Woodward 2020:20).

In addition, each space may need a different leadership style in order to thrive and become sustainable. Someone's gender, age, skills, education, cultural background may influence someone's leadership or followership style. The spaces that ICSA creates would like to be accommodating of the uniqueness of people. InnerCHANGE South Africa would like to build a symbiotic relationship between the personalities and unique giftings of its members and volunteers as it aims to make a positive contribution to society.

In the space of service that ICSA creates, the polycentric model stands a chance to become the antidote of apartheid which was all about separation, yet pointing to one model as the best. Polycentrism could be a helpful model to 'lessen the potential autocratic effects of established centres of power' (Franklin & Niemandt 2016:8). The author and his wife are the pioneers of ICSA. Currently, the leader of ICSA is someone else. This leader could be under pressure to conform to the leadership style of the founding leaders. That pressure could trickle down to different generations of followers within ICSA that are currently leading other people. The polycentric model offers an opportunity for ordinary people living in neighbourhoods of poverty such as Soshanguve invited in missional spaces to 'lead from among and with others...from creatively learning together in community and to attentiveness to the others in the community' (Franklin & Niemandt 2016:8).

Through polycentrism, there is a movement to lessen the potential autocratic effects of established centres of power, in terms of structure and centralisation in the midst of decentralisation, by means of a bottom-up approach with some degree of control:

The results are: (1) one leads from among and with others; (2) one leads from creatively learning together in community and to attentiveness to.. and within the margins of the global church. (Franklin & Niemandt 2016:8)

A polycentric model may offer an opportunity to servant leaders to be inspired by past experiences of leadership and smoothly transition a new era of a missional team service approach through innovation and the experiments

of new things. Children, teenagers and the youth seem to be open to embracing new things through innovation.

Tapping into an unconventional age group

The majority of the ICSA initiatives serve children (age 4–12 years), teenagers and young adults (from age 18). The majority of the ICSA staff and volunteers went through its existing initiatives serving children, teenagers and young adults. 'One would say that these staff and volunteers were developed from within. InnerCHANGE South Africa is learning to see children, teenagers and young adults as assets to its leadership development model. It sees its efforts as an attempt to learn to lead from the majority of the population of South Africa. In fact, '65.4% of the population of South Africa is aged 34 years and younger' (Statssa 2024). Yet, people 'under the age of 35 years of age' do not seem to be given a platform to lead, 'because of their experience in life' (Kabongo 2023:1). One general narrative of leadership capability in communities of poverty, such as Soshanguve, is that 'little experience is equated to a lack of wisdom and knowledge of how to do things. Therefore, people with little experience ... are constantly pushed away to the periphery of [leadership opportunities]' (Kabongo 2023:1). Children, teenagers and the youth tend to 'occupy a traditional marginal position' in society (Klaasen 2018:1). One would argue that this reality of marginalisation of certain age groups found in Soshanguve is a normal reality in many African societies. These societies are generally 'hierarchical and patriarchal' (Maathai 2009:31). The older someone is, the wiser he or she is perceived. Men are seen as the natural leaders and women are raised to be followers and submissive towards men.

The reality is that children, teenagers and the youth constitute more than two third of 'the global population' (Botha, Yates & Kotze 2024:6). Yet, they 'frequently encounter a treatment that regards them as immature versions of adults' (Botha et al. 2024:6). In some instances, they are 'perceived as the property of adults, not fully recognised as individuals with distinct rights of their own' (Botha et al. 2024:6). It seems like across the world, these age groups 'are considered merely undeveloped adults, passive recipients of care, occupying a separate innocence, or, perhaps, in need of being civilised' (Wall 2010:1). It looks like 'throughout the annals of history, adults have consistently held a superior status, with their opinions and rights often taking precedence' (Botha et al. 2024:6). InnerCHANGE South Africa believes that the negligence of children, teenagers and youth 'diminishes the humanity of us all' (Wall 2010:2). When these age groups 'face mistreatment and their experiences and worth are disregarded, the intricate social fabric of that community is impoverished, compromising the potential for meaning within those relationships' (Wall 2010:2).

It should be stated that some adults believe that children, teenagers and the youth:

[S]hould be protected at all times. However, in their attempt to help children who are vulnerable, adults should be cautious of cultivating a one-sided and reduced view of them and of their rights and needs. (Johannissen, Yates & Van Wyk 2019:1)

Such a one-sided model could limit the capabilities of the children, teenagers and youth's 'agency' (Johannissen et al. 2019:1). When these age groups',

participation is facilitated effectively, they acquire new skills, their confidence and knowledge are increased, and it allows them to see that their views and wishes are respected and taken into consideration. (Jones 2010:6)

InnerCHANGE South Africa is learning to intentionally and carefully defy this normal perception of who is a leader in society. InnerCHANGE South Africa is inspired by Matthew 18:2–5 where Jesus challenges its audience to strive to change and become like little children in order to enter the kingdom of God. He also connects the virtue of humility to being childlike. The author has learned a lot of leadership lessons from the children, teenagers and the youth ICSA serves. He believes that ICSA stands the chance to build a sustainable leadership model if it creates a safe platform where different age groups are in a learning community of 'equal authority and revolving leadership' as it seems to make a meaningful contribution to the kingdom of God on earth (Woodward 2012:100). In such a learning community, functionality will be measured by 'an interdependent community of leaders with their various strengths and weaknesses, who are open and transparent to others in the community' (Franklin & Niemandt 2016:5). In this learning community, leaders will be expected to 'operate within an array of interconnected communities'. They will be challenged 'to move away from established centres of power, so that one leads from among others. In this way, there will be creative learning... with attentiveness to others' especially those who are still emerging from within its ranks (Woodward 2012:214). In this learning community, members will be humble enough to recognise that:

[L]eadership can come from anyone the Holy Spirit empowers, regardless of age or experience. A formal leadership structure does not necessarily guide the relationship between the leader and follower. Instead, it is more likely to be the holy spirit who does so. (Woodward 2012:213)

Furthermore, leadership roles will 'intentionally rotate with other leaders so as to give breaks and rest to all concerned' (Woodward 2012:214). One could argue that 'a deficient understanding of children and childhood prevails' in communities such as Soshanguve (Swart & Yates 2012:11). InnerCHANGE South Africa has learned that 'positive interactions between children [teenagers, youth] and adults hold the potential to cultivate individuals who are self-assured and content, and who possess a strong sense of identity and purpose' (Botha et al. 2024:1). This is a move away from the assumption that 'children lack full rationality, wisdom and the ability to discern their best interests' (Roche 2004:279). The ICSA has found it helpful to engage with children, teenagers and the youth 'by seeking their input and listening to their perspectives' (Nel 2018:340).

InnerCHANGE South Africa is learning to build functional relationships with different age groups to strengthen its leadership muscles. It understands relationships as what connects it to other people 'like the strands of a web, spinning out in ever widening circles, fragile and easily damaged, yet filled with terrible strength' (Swart & Yates 2012:4). It understands that 'relationality is at the heart of everything' (Swart & Yates 2012:4). Different age groups should be interconnected in society. Such interconnectedness 'entails a responsibility towards each other ... our identity is molded through interactions with others' (Ackermann 2006:234). The interconnectedness will be enhanced if 'equality of power, mutuality of freedom and responsibility, love that is other-centred yet neither neglectful nor destructive of the self, and fidelity' is upheld as values (Botha et al. 2024:4).

An intentional discipleship

The ICSA foresees its future within the current generation of children, teenagers and youth it serves. It understands discipleship as 'an outlet in which the regeneration of the church leadership to the younger generation is conducted' (Darmawan, Tanhidy & Doma 2024:1). A good discipleship model would allow it to mentor and develop the next generation of servant leaders that would improve ICSA's contribution to the common good. This discipleship model will be and remain relevant if it prioritises 'leadership regeneration' (Darmawan et al. 2024:1).

It seems like one of the problems facing mission organisations such as InnerCHANGE is the 'lack of leaders with the ability to develop their ministry' (Prihanto 2018). This problem could be true about the church as a whole. It seems like a hopeful alternative could be for the church 'to regenerate its leadership through discipleship' (Prihanto 2018). The youth, teenagers and children 'are expected to continue church leadership in the future, which necessitates preparation for them, especially in terms of spiritual growth' (Darmawan et al. 2024:1). Discipleship seems to be one of the best ways 'to help' children, teenagers and the youth to grow holistically (Panggarra & Sumule 2019). Such growth should prepare them to competently lead a church entity they are a part of. Discipleship would catalyse such growth. Discipleship then could be seen as a good way to introduce and reintroduce Jesus to people 'in order to rekindle a vibrant faith' that is attractive because it will be improving the quality of life around us (Engelbrecht & Schoeman 2021:1). It will orchestrate 'a radical change of heart which is the imitation of Jesus through the retelling and remodelling of his stories which are contagious' (Joubert 2013:124). Such contamination could birth 'a movement people join up' and learn to invite others to join (Nel 2017:2). As sojourners, people will learn 'to live life in the kingdom and seek his righteousness as the priority of life' (Nel 2017:2). Together, they will participate in the True God's caring control of the whole life, while celebrating the great gift of God-liberation from everything that oppresses people and prevents them from knowing God, and being known by him (Niemandt 2016:1). They will

also need 'regular realignments' with the deep truth of Christianity (Volf 2015:26). The author believes that followers of Jesus 'need to keep realigning themselves to the authentic versions of their faith' (Volf 2015:26). The realigning seems to work well in the context of a community. Hence, ICSA believes in building communities of practice.

Building communities of practice

InnerCHANGE South Africa serves its local contexts through practical initiatives such as sports, tutoring, computer literacy class and several age-friendly mentoring groups. It has found these 'initiatives as helpful tools to invite people to become Christians' (Kabongo 2024:312). All these initiatives are run by a team of leaders. The ICSA does not allow a single individual to run an initiative. For people who feel called to start their own initiative in a different local community, ICSA still requires them to recruit a team of leaders before they can begin to serve tangibly. The hope is to recruit leaders who are 'attuned to God's leading, work well together, exercise accountability and have a good interconnected network with the broader' power structure of a local community as well as the local church. The aim is to develop these servants into missional leaders. Missional leadership can be understood as 'the transformation of people and institutions to participate, through meaningful relations and in the power of the Spirit, in God's mission' (Van Wynen & Niemandt 2020:8). Missional leadership is a work in progress, a journey. Someone could also understand it as a 'spirituality for the road. It is robust enough to be carried into everyday life' (Van Wynen & Niemandt 2020:8).

InnerCHANGE South Africa leaders are encouraged to lean on each other for mutual affirmation and mutual-equipping as they learn from doing what it means to be good news agents. They aim to build a community of practice in which they learn to become brothers and sisters in Christ committed to loving others through their service and the building of relationships with those they serve. In these communities of practice, individuals bring in their 'experiences' and perspectives that contribute to strengthening how ICSA serves local communities (Graham, Walton & Ward 2005:3). Their interactions help generate 'new knowledge' that benefits both the servants and the served (Stevens 2017:2024). These interactions have generated, over the years, principles and good practices that the team understands as 'theologies from below' (Stevens 2017:2003). These theologies have been instrumental in starting new initiatives and sustaining them. These interactions are meant to build a polycentric leadership style. This style necessitates humility from all parties involved to 'see each of their members as assets'. They stress that each of their members should have a dual role of a leader and a follower 'so that their interactions can be mutually beneficial' (White & Woodward 2016:53). InnerCHANGE South Africa believes that 'people need each other to stay actively faithful in pursuing a certain goal or mission' (Kabongo 2024:12). This leadership style has the potential to be 'emancipatory', because it will empower every member as a participant and contributor of the missional family called InnerCHANGE South Africa (Swartz 2011:48).

Communities of practice also aim to build trust among its members. Working together interdependently and the common goal of raising disciples and developing local leaders has the potential to build trust among good news agents.

Reflection

This article reflects on how a member of the body of Christ such as ICSA takes a mission posture to interact with the culture around it and biblical narratives that strengthen its incarnational presence in some neighbourhoods of poverty in South Africa. Incarnational ministry reminds the author that Christianity is a 'religion or a faith of the body' (Creamer 2012:34). Because 'an authentic Christian spirituality is embodied' (Van Niekerk & Niemandt 2019:1). Through incarnation, God does not only identify *with* a worldly reality (Israel), but identifies *as a* worldly reality (Jesus). Bauckham (2015:33) states, 'God gives God's self the identity of the human Jesus'. Another way to say this is that 'in Jesus, God became a person, and simultaneously a person that became human' (Kung 1987:1–2).

The concept of embodiment has encouraged ICSA to create spaces where a person would discover and exercise their leadership muscles. In the context of South Africa where space could communicate inclusion or exclusion, creating spaces where servant leaders could be nurtured is critical in communicating a desire to be inclusive as much as possible to the building of a country such as South Africa starting from local communities. These leaders will first learn to serve as their primary role. Some of those servants will become leaders of others. In this regard Volf (2015:2) states, 'But all of them will be working for the flourishing of life [around them] and a global common good'. The South African context is, generally speaking religious. This context provides ICSA with an opportunity to positively make a small contribution to the common good through its efforts. It is known and argued that 'religion provides people with a sense and purpose, a way to cope with the many crises of life and direction on the relationship between individuals, communities and creation' (Van Niekerk & Niemandt 2019:3). Religion 'also influences the feeling and reality of well-being' (Van Niekerk & Niemandt 2019:2).

This contribution could become tangible if ICSA uses its working model of discipleship and mentoring of its staff, volunteers and the served. Discipleship would provide foundational principles the servants will function under. It will also equip the servants to disciple others into disciple makers or just servant leaders. InnerCHANGE South Africa stresses that the sustainability of its ministry would be measured by its ability to consistently raise generations of good news agents. It understands that the earthly ministry of Christ in its entirety compels us to understand why his incarnation was intended to all human beings to act as agents of the *missio Dei* in the world (Thinane 2021:4). It seems like,

Jesus Christ was fully aware that his earthly ministry could not be carried out without human accompaniment, so in the early days of his ministry he called the 12 and many others to be his companions on his journey, on which it was the mission of *missio Dei* to be fulfilled. (Thinane 2021:4)

Hence, it is critical to emphasise the spirit of 'togetherness' with a common purpose toward a shared vision as a team of good news agents (Thinane 2021:5).

The spirit of togetherness will be nurtured in communities of practice where people will learn to trust one another as fellow soldiers in the trenches strive to serve and love others meaningfully.

Conclusion

This case study wanted to depict some of the ways the concept of triadology has influenced ICSA ministry model. InnerCHANGE South Africa serves in African neighbourhoods of poverty with a predominantly communal culture. It found helpful to create spaces where people can communally learn to serve and lead in ways that are culturally relevant and meaningful. These spaces have the potential to be functional incubators of good news agents. InnerCHANGE South Africa has also been tapping into the marginalised section of the population such as children, teenagers and youth in its development of good news agents. Through these efforts, ICSA has been able to make a small contribution in bringing marginalised groups of people to the centre of society as capable community builders. These efforts are a work in progress, yet ICSA has seen hopeful results as it implements its discipleship and mentoring approaches.

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K.T.L.K. is the sole author of this research article.

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Disclaimer

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